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ABSTRACT

A School Context Analysis Form, designed to access the readiness of a particular school to participate in planned change, is introduced and described. This report chronicles two improvement efforts in two different schools to demonstrate how the eight identified contextual indicators interact to influence improvement efforts. The eight factors are: (1) resources; (2) incentives and disincentives; (3) linkages; (4) priorities; (5) factions; (6) turnover; (7) current practices; and (8) prior projects. The third school discussed represents an example of a situation where context was considered prior to the improvement and manipulated in order to help ensure that the improvement would run smoothly and successfully. Based on this last experience, recommendations are offered for dealing with the eight factors and thus modifying context to support improvement. A 19-item reference list is appended. (LMS)

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DEVELOPING READINESS FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT:

LESSONS OF CONTEXT

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CONTENTS

	Page
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND	1
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND METHODS	7
ANALYSIS OF TWO SCHOOLS: HOW SCHOOL CONTEXTS CAN DIFFER	9
Resources	10
Incentives	11
Linkages	13
Priorities	14
Factions	15
Turnover	17
Current Practices	17
Prior Projects	19
MODIFYING CONTEXT TO SUPPORT IMPROVEMENT	21
Resources	26
Incentives	27
Linkages	28
Priorities	29
Factions	30
Turnover	31
Current Practices	33
Prior Projects	34
CONCLUSIONS	36
REFERENCES	37

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Between 1978 and 1981, staff from Research for Better Schools, Inc. (RBS), conducted a study of the implementation of "good ideas" in 14 schools (Corbett, Dawson, & Firestone, 1984). The study came to the conclusion that unfortunately good ideas don't work everywhere. There are eight factors of local context that interact to enable a "good idea" to take hold or prevent it from ever getting off the ground. They are:

1. Resources

   The critical resource needed for effective implementation of an improvement effort is the time of both administrators and teachers; however financial and material resources can be important, also.

2. Incentives and Disincentives

   Sources of gratification and discouragement can be used as incentives or disincentives, but no motivator consistently acts as one or the other. For example, participation in and of itself can become a disincentive when its perceived costs in time and energy outweigh its apparent benefits. Money does not seem to be a big motivator: rather, what seems to motivate people is a sense that their contribution is valued and that they are contributing to something useful.

3. Linkages

   Linkage is the interdependence of subunits--grade-level groups, departments, teams, and the like. Interdependence means the extent to which members of a subunit affect each others' behavior.

4. Priorities

   If an improvement does not fit in with one of the two highest priority district or school goals, it will run into trouble. The fact is that most districts and schools do not have sufficient resources to address more than their top two goals effectively.

5. Factions

   Staff factions and tensions play a part in the direction improvement projects take. There is tension among factions in all schools and districts; however, counterproductive tension among factions can stop an improvement effort before it starts.

6. Turnover

Schools are predictably unpredictable. You can never be sure exactly which specific event will disrupt things, but you can count on something happening. Staff turnover is the most significant disruption for an improvement effort, especially when someone crucial leaves.

7. Current Practices

This factor involves three phenomena. First, there is the discrepancy between changes to be made and the current state of organizational performance, or what staff are currently doing versus what they are going to be doing when implementing the improvement. A second, less thought of, but equally important factor is the discrepancy between the activities associated with the improvement effort and the skills of participants. Encouragement needed versus encouragement provided constitutes an all too frequent third discrepancy.

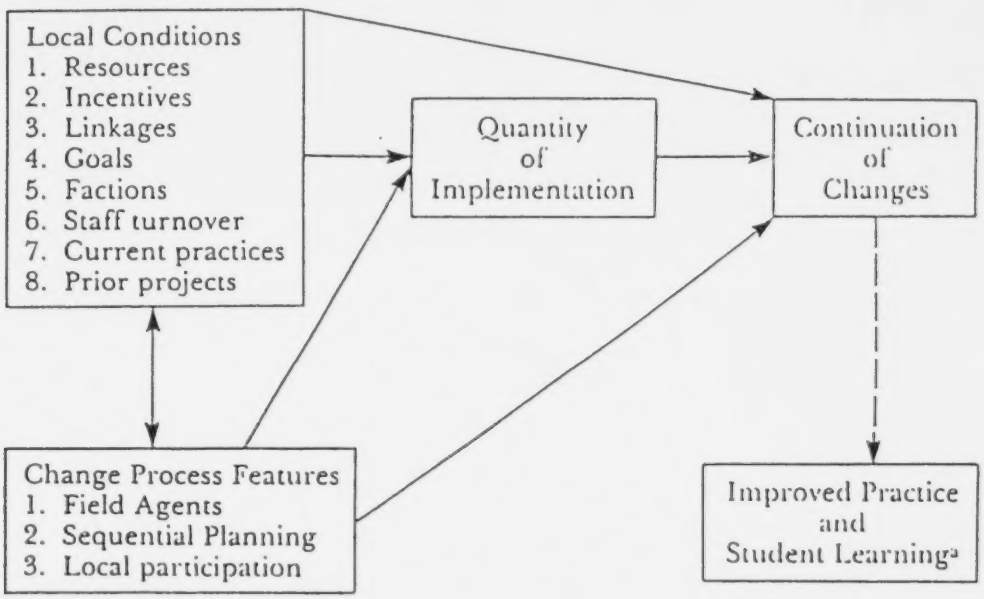
8. Prior Projects

Previous projects leave a legacy. In many schools and districts, the legacy is that the administration is always starting something but it never seems to get finished. In others, the legacy is that they never do anything. Legacies affect motivation and commitment.

Figure 1 summarizes the overall conceptual approach that guided the study of planned change and local context and that resulted in these factors being identified. The study's hypothesis was that implementation and continuation outcomes would be products of the interaction between conditions of local school context and the processes used to introduce and carry out the changes called for by the improvement efforts introduced to the schools studied. The key was to understand which conditions were important, what aspects of the change processes were particularly susceptible to their influence, and how all this affected each improvement project's results.

Figure 1 shows the local conditions of context, features of the change process, and change outcomes examined. Local conditions of context drew particular attention as the study proceeded because of the special importance that school-level factors began assuming as influences on the change processes. These factors included both organizational ones as described by Crandall, et al. (1982), for example; and cultural ones as described by Deal & Kennedy (1982) or Fullan (1982), for instance.

FIGURE 1. Conceptual Approach of the Study



[a]Expected but unexamined relationship. Studies of school change attempt to explain implementation and/or continuation outcomes, whereas studies of school improvement seek to discover whether the changes actually prove to be beneficial. This study is of school change; one to two years provided too short a time span to make global assessments of benefit.

The three features of the change process listed at the bottom left-hand corner of Figure 1 are those that were integral to the change approaches and had received considerable attention in the published literature (e.g., Berman, 1981; Conway, 1984; Louis, 1981).

The local conditions of context, the change process features, and the interaction of the two seemed to combine to influence both implementation (the amount of change initially put into place) and continuation (the amount of change that lasts) fairly consistently in the 14 schools studied.

Since this study was completed, RBS staff have been testing and using this information about context in their work with local and state educational agencies as these agencies introduce improvement projects. Moreover, they have attempted to add to the information base about contextual factors whenever possible by chronicling their work. Beyond this however, they have utilized this ever-growing experience and information base to develop a school context analysis process which they have begun to use to judge a school's readiness for change. This process enables anyone about to undertake an improvement effort to judge a school's or district's readiness for and susceptibility to change. It is an informal rating system intended to produce a sketch of local context using the School Context Analysis Form which follows. It is based on the eight factors of context listed above and what these factors mean, operationally.

School Context Analysis Form

Factor of Context	Operational Indicator	High	Moderate	Low	Comments
1. Resources	Amount of time principal can devote				
	Amount of available teacher time				
	Level of financial/material resources available				
2. Incentives	Protection of teacher's in-class time				
	Opportunities for formal recognition				
	Opportunities for informal recognition				
3. Linkages	Level of formal staff interaction				
	Level of informal staff interaction				
4. Priorities	Level of priority among school goals				
	Level of priority among district goals				
5. Factions	Level of tension between teachers & administrators				
	Level of tension among departments or grade levels				
	Level of tension within departments or grade levels				
6. Turnover	Level of teacher turnover in last five years				
	Level of administrator turnover in last five years				
	Level of central office turnover in last five years				
7. Current Practices	Level of "customary" behavior change required				
	Discrepancy between existing skills and needed skills				
	Amount of encouragement habitually present in school				
8. Prior Projects	Number of new projects undertaken in last five years				
	Number of these same projects currently in operation				

The left-hand column of the School Context Analysis Form contains the eight school context factors, from resources through prior projects. The next column to the right lists two or three operational indicators for each factor. These indicators describe conditions which can be observed in the school in quantitative terms. The next three columns represent a rudimentary quantification scheme, from high to moderate to low. A final column provides space for comments. The analysis task involves rating each operational indicator from "low" to "high" based on prevalent conditions in school context.

In the following discussion, we offer chronicles of two improvement efforts in two different schools to show how these indicators manifest themselves and how the eight contextual factors can interact to influence improvement efforts. We then offer a third chronicle; this one of a school where context was considered prior to the improvement and manipulated in order to help insure that the improvement would run smoothly and successfully. In the course of this last chronicle, we offer some recommendations for dealing with the eight factors and thus modifying context to support improvement.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE AND METHODS

Theoretically our perspective is one of planned change. The study that resulted in the identification and description of the eight contextual factors, itself, was grounded in the literature of change and innovation. Likewise, the analysis process we present draws from that same body of literature as do the case studies we use as illustrations.

The case studies are products of a re-analysis of three case descriptions developed to document local implementation of improvement processes stressing collaborative decision-making and team planning (D'Amico & Miller, 1985; D'Amico & Presseisen, 1985; D'Amico & Wilson, 1986). The information for the original studies was collected through observations, interviews, and the analysis of documents (Yin, 1984). The observations were conducted at each site during improvement planning and policy-making meetings and discussions. Interviews were conducted, again at each site, with all key improvement effort participants--e.g., school and district administrators and teachers--as well as with others, not directly participating, who were affected by the improvement efforts. Documents generated as a result of the improvement effort--e.g., minutes of meetings, written recommendations, and reports, policy position papers, etc.--also were examined at each site. Document analyses, observations, and interviews were guided by lists of information categories designed to help in the identification of significant issues of organization and culture and how these issues manifested themselves and were resolved in each case, for example:

- Influence of administrative style and involvement (Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Rosenblum & Louis, 1981).
- Degree and nature of incentives (Corwin, 1981; Fullan, 1982).

- Nature and impact of internal and external linkages (Corbett, 1982; Weick, 1982).
- Local adaptations made to the improvement process and local adaptations caused by the improvement process (Beyer & Trice, 1987; Fullan, 1982).
- Internal communication and use of information and data in carrying out the improvement process (Ballard & James, 1983 Dawson & D'Amico, 1985).

In re-analyzing these cases, we first scrutinized them to isolate the specific organizational and cultural phenomena deemed critical by the authors. We then examined these phenomena in light of the operational indicators listed on the School Context Analysis Form to ascertain what role these indicators played in the phenomena. From this we created hypotheses about the impact that the indicators and the contextual factors they defined might have had on each improvement effort. We tested these hypotheses with the authors of the case studies, obtained their recommendations, and re-framed the case descriptions to highlight the contextual factors and their impact in each case. Finally, we reviewed these re-framed case descriptions with the authors and revised them accordingly.

ANALYSIS OF TWO SCHOOLS: HOW SCHOOL CONTEXT CAN DIFFER

Despite the difference in the grade levels covered by Pine Lane Elementary School and Jackson High School, they were organizationally and culturally quite similar when RBS worked with them. For example, both were located in communities that had once been prosperous, but were now somewhat depressed. Likewise, both were experiencing changes in the character of their student bodies from a largely white, middle SES student body to a largely minority, low SES one. Both were experiencing a decline in student achievement and a conflict of cultures between the norms and values of the largely white, middle SES faculties and those of the students. Lastly, both school faculties had been teaching for a long time--long enough to have lived through all these changes and to begin to see the need to address the effects that these changes were having on the schools.

In response to growing concern about these effects, both schools embarked on the same kind of improvement effort. The administrations of both schools introduced local site management teams made up of teachers who would serve as an executive cabinet. The team's task was to work together and with other staff to identify critical school-wide problems, formulate potential solutions, and present policy recommendations to the building administration. RBS staff were to help develop these teams and provide them with technical assistance, as they undertook their problem identification and policy recommendation tasks.

However, as similar as these improvement efforts appeared at the outset, their implementation and effects differed greatly. The effort worked like a well-oiled clock at Pine Lane, and the management team became a

potent advisory body. At Jackson, the effort floundered. The team never jelled, nor did it have much of an impact on school policy. Eventually, it disappeared. These differences can be analyzed and understood in terms of the eight factors of school context.

Resources

Most educators equate resources with staff time and money. Even though the principals of both Jackson High and Pine Lane Elementary expressed interest in being a part of the development and operation of their respective management teams, at Jackson the principal indicated that schedule demands would allow only sporadic attendance at their meetings. At Pine Lane, on the other hand, the principal adjusted commitments to insure uninterrupted presence at every single management team activity. So the first issue of context at the two schools was: How much time did each principal devote to the improvement effort? In both instances, the principal's time was seen as being symbolic as well as substantive. Often just his or her presence was enough to convince others that the effort was important. Even though the Pine Lane principal did very little at meetings, the team members found the principal's presence reassuring. At Jackson, the team often wondered aloud whether the principal's absence was a message.

There also was the issue of how much time teachers devoted to each change effort. For this factor of school context, it was important to look at staff time as unobligated time--time when staff were not log-jammed with classroom, preparation, lunchroom, or other operational responsibilities. Moreover, this time had to be seen as quality time--not necessarily time at the end of the day when staff were too tired or at the beginning of the day when they were just barely awake.

Although the management teams at both Pine Lane and Jackson met at the end of the day, there was a difference. The Pine Lane meetings occurred during bus dismissal, a half-period devoted to organizing students to board their school buses. The chaos that typically accompanied this half-period prevented it from being productive time, and all teachers considered this half-period as time wasted. Most meetings at Jackson, on the other hand, occurred after the school day during teachers' free time--a fact most participants resented.

Finally, the issue of money, or more specifically, the support and materials that money buys was considered. The teachers at Pine Lane and Jackson understood that they would not receive additional stipends for participating and they could live with this. Nonetheless, in both schools staff expected clerical support and class coverage when necessary. The building principal at Pine Lane was aware of these expectations and made sure these resources were provided. At Jackson, the principal also was aware of the teachers' expectations for support, but adopted a "hands-off" posture and made it clear that the management team itself was responsible for arranging support systems.

Incentives

The next factor of context looked at was incentives for participants. As with resources, money represented a powerful incentive, but time and recognition seemed to count more.

As an incentive, teachers looked at time as protection of class time, rather than availability of unobligated time (which was more important when viewed as a resource). For the most part, these teachers hated to be away from their students during school time. They were not confident that anyone

else could teach their students as well as they could. Thus at both Pine Lane and Jackson, teachers saw time away from students as a negative incentive. The more that participation in the management team required them to be away from their students, the less they wanted to join in activities related to it. In fact, the Pine Lane management team said, "no," when the principal offered to provide class coverage for them to start their meetings earlier. They did not feel comfortable being away from their students even for one period a month. And most carried out their individual management team tasks on their own time rather than absent themselves from their classes.

Recognition was also an important incentive, and in our analysis of the context at these schools, it was important to determine how many opportunities were provided for formal recognition of those involved. The principal at Pine Lane sent thank-you letters and also acknowledged the participants at a Board of Education meeting, at faculty meetings, and in the school newspaper. Overall, this formal recognition went a long way. The same can be said for informal recognition. The smallest gesture--a "How's the new effort going?" from the Pine Lane principal--got a great deal of mileage.

In contrast, participants at Jackson received almost no positive recognition. The principal rarely spoke about their efforts with them or anyone else. When sporadically attending their meetings, the principal dominated the proceedings with his own agenda, leaving staff with the impression that he did not value their agenda or efforts. The principal also stood by when other administrators and teachers belittled the team's effectiveness and capabilities. This general lack of recognition led the

majority of teachers at Jackson High School to feel underpaid and underappreciated. So, when the principal asked them to take on extra responsibilities, every possible opportunity for recognition of the teachers should have been considered. Yet, this was not done.

Linkages

As noted, linkage refers to the communication and interaction among staff. It is an especially important factor of context when it comes to spreading and institutionalizing change efforts. In our analysis of context at Pine Lane and Jackson, we considered two kinds of linkage: formal and informal.

Formal linkage is formal staff interaction and communication. It can include faculty meetings, departmental meetings, staff development sessions, in-service days, and the like. Formal interaction involves activities devoted specifically to staff working together and exchanging ideas on ways to upgrade curriculum or instruction or on practices that may lead to improved academic performance. Formal linkage also can mean tight adherence to curriculum guides or programs. When all teachers follow the same curriculum closely, there is a lot of formal linkage. Informal linkage, on the other hand, refers to more self-initiated, or social interactions.

In both schools there were ample opportunities for formal and informal interaction. For example, there were two faculty and departmental meetings at Jackson High School every month. Unfortunately, for the most part, the faculty meetings dealt principally with "administravia"--things that could have been covered in memos, such as state and federal aid guidelines, standardized testing schedules, report card procedures, and so forth. The

departmental meetings sometimes focused on instructional issues, but usually they were devoted to presentations about new textbooks or instructional techniques, with little exchange of ideas. Few Jackson teachers were dissatisfied with this arrangement, so there was no push to use these opportunities for formal discussion of tasks associated with management team activities.

Likewise, there was virtually no discussion of management team activities during informal interactions. In fact at Jackson, informal interaction was an exception rather than a norm. Staff at Jackson rarely socialized with each other and, when informal interactions did occur, they seemed strained.

In contrast, there was a great deal of informal staff interaction at Pine Lane. There also were regular faculty meetings which usually turned out to be informally formal. That is, although there was a set agenda for each one, it was covered through discussion rather than as a series of announcements and presentations. The principal and management team used these faculty meetings to discuss their activities and to obtain faculty input about potential policy decisions and plans. And in many instances, the substance of the discussions that took place during these formal opportunities carried over into the Pine Lane staff's informal interactions--over lunch, driving in the car pool, during prep periods, or at unofficial meetings before or after school.

Priorities

As educators, we all know that school, district, and classroom priorities and goals are constantly changing. Yet, our opinion was that the

two improvement efforts probably stood a much better chance of succeeding if they were among the school's and district's top priorities and stayed that way for a reasonable amount of time.

The establishment of an effective, productive management team was indeed the number one priority of Pine Lane Elementary's principal, who believed that such a team would be the cornerstone of any subsequent school improvement activity. The principal was willing to devote a lot of time and energy to creating and developing it. Moreover, he made it clear to everyone that a viable management team was Pine Lane's top priority and would stay that way until it was firmly established.

At Jackson, on the other hand, the management team was not a high priority. The principal said it was one of the top ten, but building maintenance and repair, employee relations, student discipline, and the state monitoring program tended to be put ahead of it. Further, in contrast to Pine Lane, Jackson's principal did not see the establishment of such a team as a way to deal with other priorities. So it did not become a top priority at Jackson High School. This was common knowledge and, in fact, even those participating did not give the management team top priority.

Factions

RBS has yet to study a school where tension among staff factions was totally absent. Usually tension exists among some portion of the staff--tension between teachers and administrators, tension among departments or grade levels, even tension within departments or grade levels. However, tension is not necessarily a negative thing. Moderate levels, properly channeled, may even be productive. Tension can motivate and feed change and

improvement. Teachers and administrators discussing different--perhaps conflicting--approaches to educational excellence can often come up with a better curriculum or better instructional strategies. Tension can mean communication. It also can mean staff are thinking and interacting; interaction like this can often lead to improvement. So, as long as it is focused on instructional issues and is not quibbling or carping, tension is a neutral term in an analysis of school context.

At Pine Lane, this neutral kind of tension was observed. The staff there were a mixture of young and old. Some had been at Pine Lane fifteen or more years, and some had been there fewer than five years. The age and tenure differences occasionally created differences of opinion about how things should be done at Pine Lane. The staff there also had a variety of educational philosophies and approached instruction from many directions. This variety coupled with the existence of many avenues for formal and informal staff interaction made Pine Lane a fairly tense school, when it came to agreeing on educational goals and strategies. But, it was tense in a productive way.

Jackson was also a tense school. Teachers and administrators--most of whom had been at the school ten years or more--mistrusted each other and were suspicious of each others' motives. They criticized each other continually in a half-joking, but serious way. Professional differences over instructional approaches or educational philosophies were rarely the subjects of these criticisms. Rather, they focused on who was shirking their responsibilities, who lacked competence, who was politically allied with whom, and other, similarly non-educational issues. Things had been this way for many years; tension at Jackson was counterproductive.

Turnover

By and large, it seems that staff turnover has been a minor problem in education in the last ten years or so. Experiences at Jackson and Pine Lane confirmed this. The average teacher tenure at Jackson was thirteen years. The average at Pine Lane was more than ten. This was seen as both good and bad. On the one hand, low turnover meant stability and continuity. On the other hand, it could have meant resistance to change and routine thinking. The level of staff turnover is a two-edged sword for improvement efforts.

Although not crucial in these cases, turnover is an important consideration in any analysis of context, nonetheless. A certain amount of stability of staff is desirable when carrying out school improvements. Improvement efforts usually need the time and attention of the same group of people for a sustained period of time. Turnover among the improvement project supporters can seriously hamper--even kill--the effort. Not only that, a major turnover in central office or school building administration can push an improvement effort way down on the list of priorities, or eliminate it entirely. Yet, turning over staff who cannot or will not adopt and use improvements might facilitate the improvement project. On balance, significant turnover is often disruptive, and this usually outweighs its possible beneficial effects.

Current Practices

Our analysis of the next contextual factor, current practices, involved determining what were the normative and customary behaviors in each school and how these compared with the behaviors called for by the improvement project introduced in each. That is, to what degree were staff expected to

change their customary behavior when they started working on the improvement effort. And how much discrepancy was there between the skills they had and the skills they needed to make these behavioral changes?

The planning activities of the Jackson and Pine Lane management teams provide an illustration. In both schools, the teachers seemed to be good planners, but the majority of their planning was done by themselves, for themselves. They planned their lessons, activities, and the use of materials and resources. Not many of these teachers planned as members of a team, and not many were charged with making plans that had a school-wide impact. Yet, in both schools the major charge to the management teams was to work cooperatively to identify school problems and to create alternative school-wide improvement plans.

For reasons that remain somewhat unclear, the Pine Lane teachers were able to carry out cooperative planning tasks well. The teachers at Jackson experienced great frustration with these planning tasks, because they believed they required them to change their customary behavior too dramatically. Also, they may have been frustrated with cooperative planning, because they did not necessarily have the skills or trusting attitudes they needed for planning in a group. Moreover, the discrepancy between the skills and attitudes they had and the skills and attitudes they needed may have been too great.

Another contextual consideration related to current practices, and also to incentives, may have contributed to the Jackson teachers' frustration with their planning tasks. This was the amount of encouragement they felt they were receiving for trying something new. At Jackson there was no tradition or practice of encouraging teachers. Administrators believed that

teacher salaries should be sufficient encouragement for them to take additional responsibilities. Teachers disagreed, countering that their additional responsibilities typically were administrative tasks for which administrators were paid.

Pay was not the only issue, either. Teachers at Jackson never felt they got any other kind of payoff for extra efforts. They did not see student achievement increasing, improvements in the quality of their work life, or lightening of their non-teaching duties. In short, they did not see any encouragement for doing extra work.

Pine Lane teachers, on the other hand, saw participation itself as a payoff. They were encouraged in their extra efforts, because they believed they were contributing to school improvement. The principal's long-standing policy of soliciting staff input reinforced this belief, as did the willingness to adopt many of their recommendations. In addition, the principal knew that district money could not be used as an encouragement, as it simply was not available. So instead, special duty assignments, extra prep periods, formal and informal recognition, and even simple words of personal acknowledgement were used very effectively to encourage the staff to keep up their extra efforts.

Prior Projects

The last factor of context we investigated had to do with the degree of commitment and persistence that those involved in each improvement could draw upon. Successful improvement projects typically run through a life cycle, from introduction through widespread adoption to institutionalization, that can take five years or more. Yet, we have seen schools initiate

a number of improvement projects and other innovations within just a few years, indicating low commitment and persistence of effort for any one of them.

Jackson staff could remember more than five new improvement efforts that had been started within the past three years. They could not remember, however, any that had been completed. In fact, within two months of introducing the management team effort, the principal introduced a new program of curriculum development. The two improvement efforts ran simultaneously and, in the opinion of Jackson's staff, competitively.

This behavior was fairly typical of Jackson's administrators. They seemed to be introducing new projects all the time. As they brought in new ones, they sloughed off old ones, and nothing seemed to get enough attention for long enough to take hold. Because of this, Jackson's administration had a reputation among the staff for never following through. As a consequence, staff at Jackson were inclined to remain uninvolved, because they did not see any long term commitment. They saw Jackson's improvement efforts as asking too much in terms of time and energy, and they had seen too many come and go, but not stay and make things better.

On the other hand, staff may shy away if they have had no experience at all with innovative projects. The balanced position, between no experience and too much, was illustrated by Pine Lane staff, who had undertaken a moderate number of school improvement projects over the years. Because they had experienced improvement efforts with all the excitement and satisfaction that they brought, they looked forward to the management team effort as something new and exciting, not as an intrusion.

MODIFYING CONTEXT TO SUPPORT IMPROVEMENT

As we noted earlier it is possible for schools to succeed in their improvement efforts if they take advantage of their contextual strengths and attend to their contextual weaknesses, and there is no school where context cannot be adjusted. This is why the context analysis process outlined earlier can be a valuable first step toward school improvement. It enables school staff to create a profile of their school's context, use it to identify potential strengths and weaknesses, and begin adjusting their context to insure successful school improvement efforts. RBS' experiences in a third school, Yorkshire Junior High School, show how this can happen.

Yorkshire, like both Jackson High and Pine Lane Elementary, was experiencing a number of demographic shifts that were contributing to lowered student achievement. A period of economic depression in the once-thriving local industries brought about changes in the surrounding community and the type of residents in it. They were younger, less affluent, and more likely to be on public assistance. Several families often shared what were once single family homes. The children from these families, the Yorkshire students, were characterized by the school staff as being less academically motivated. They also were seen to be more prone to cut school and get into trouble while in school. Overall, the staff saw them as poor students. And because of this perception, the faculty developed lowered expectations for these children. In fact, the students were not doing well in school. To make matters worse, the Yorkshire teachers felt that the parents were unconcerned about this situation. Indeed, there was little parent involvement at Yorkshire.

The school historically had a good reputation, and the superintendent wanted to preserve it in the face of mounting challenges. The superintendent recognized that Yorkshire was on a decline, and so convinced the principal to create the same kind of site management team that had been introduced at Pine Lane Elementary and Jackson High, as a first step to preventing further decline. It was a kind of experiment in the superintendent's mind. If the management team succeeded in bringing about school improvement at Yorkshire--currently not the neediest secondary school--it would be introduced into the district's other junior highs, and eventually, into the high schools.

As was the case in the other two schools, the Yorkshire site management team was to be made up of a group of teachers. Their charge was to work together and with other staff at the school to identify critical school-wide problems, research potential solutions, and help the building administration develop policies and programs for addressing problems. The ultimate goal, of course, was to reverse the downward slide of student achievement. As with Pine Lane and Jackson, RBS staff were to help develop the team and work with them in problem identification and policy formulation.

When RBS staff examined the school's organization and culture, they concluded that Yorkshire would not be a good site for initiating a school improvement effort. Their reconstruction of the situation at the school according to the categories on the School Context Analysis Form follows.

School Context Analysis Form

Factor of Context	Operational Indicator	High	Moderate	Low	Comments
1. Resources	Amount of time principal can devote		X—X		
	Amount of available teacher time			X—X	None apparently need mechanisms
	Level of financial/material resources available	X—X			If committed — otherwise, low
2. Incentives	Protection of teacher's in-class time			X—	Currently duties interfere
	Opportunities for formal recognition		X—		Staff meetings?
	Opportunities for informal recognition			X	Not much informal interaction
3. Linkages	Level of formal staff interaction			X—X	Department and faculty meetings
	Level of informal staff interaction			X	Terrible quibbling
4. Priorities	Level of priority among school goals		X?X		Unknown
	Level of priority among district goals	X			Seems to be #1
5. Factions	Level of tension between teachers & administrators	X			} Very tense atmosphere here
	Level of tension among departments or grade levels	X			
	Level of tension within departments or grade levels	X			
6. Turnover	Level of teacher turnover in last five years	X—X			Transfers
	Level of administrator turnover in last five years			X	
	Level of central office turnover in last five years		X		Fairly new supt.
7. Current Practices	Level of "customary" behavior change required	X—X			Considering lack of cooperation and current styles
	Discrepancy between existing skills and needed skills		X?		Unknown, really
	Amount of encouragement habitually present in school			X—X	See incentives
8. Prior Projects	Number of new projects undertaken in last five years			X—X	State mandated LRP
	Number of these same projects currently in operation			X—X	

Teachers showed a great deal of hostility toward school administrators, and they felt they had virtually no influence over school policies or procedures. There seemed to be hardly any communication between teachers and administrators and not much communication among the teachers themselves. Also, there was a great deal of conflict; teachers were at odds with each other, as well as with with administration.

The focal point of most of the hostility and disgruntlement was the building principal. The kindest of the staff viewed this principal as a "directive" manager. Others were often more blunt. However they characterized it, this management style did not sit well with teachers. They thought it created a "blockage," which was why they were not getting anywhere in their efforts to crack down on students and improve the school. It was hard to know what the principal thought of the teachers' opinions of him and his style. He seemed to be aware of some negative views, as every now and then he made oblique references, for example, "They know the final decisions are mine, even if they don't always like them."

The principal also seemed concerned that Yorkshire maintain its reputation as a good school and, indeed, improve. Ostensibly, this concern for school improvement is what drew the principal to participate in the effort to form a management team. Of course, the principal also had the clear message from the central office to create such a team and to use it for school improvement, along with the promise of resources and other support. Finally, there was strong support, perhaps even pressure, for some sort of expansion of the decision making role of teachers. This pressure came not only from the Yorkshire teachers themselves, but also from the district teachers' association. Within this environment of pressure, support, and

incentive, the principal at Yorkshire seemed to have little choice but to establish a management team in the school.

The rest of the school staff, in contrast, did not feel the same pressures for this particular endeavor as the principal. Many were skeptical, citing other similar attempts at administrator-teacher cooperation and school improvement projects that had not been able to overcome the "blockage" (i.e., the principal). Some questioned the principal's and the district's sincerity and their promises of support. Apparently, teachers at Yorkshire were not easily influenced by central office pressure (perhaps cognizant of the role that a recent strike had played in the removal of the last superintendent). But, individually, they did seem to be genuinely eager to improve the situation at their school. So, although concerned about who was in control, who was accountable, and the sincerity of the district's and principal's commitment, they were willing to give it a chance.

The end of this story was a happy one. Three years after the idea of a site management team was introduced to Yorkshire Junior High, it had become institutionalized. Tension among staff was lower and the level of communication was higher. Staff proudly produced documents detailing the many improvement projects underway at their school. Nearly all credited the management team for this state of affairs. Even better, most everyone in the school and many at the district office considered the team an integral part of school operations.

Many things contributed to this success, including the energy and commitment of those involved and the fact that, at their early stages, the projects initiated by the management team had produced a positive impact on school. But, it was the way the superintendent, principal, and to some

degree, the teachers seemed to have manipulated their context that apparently paved the way for the success of this effort. This kind of manipulation of context can be accomplished in most situations. Below are observations about how it was carried out at Yorkshire--observations that suggest lessons for others attempting to improve the context for their improvement efforts.

There is no doubt that the Yorkshire staff, led by the superintendent and principal, took a hard look at the situation at this school, and pinpointed barriers to change in it. Once they identified these barriers, they worked to remove or overcome them, thereby making their improvement project easier to conduct and more likely to take hold.

Resources

The Yorkshire superintendent recognized that teacher skepticism might very well kill the management team idea without his symbolic and forceful participation. So he made time in his schedule to attend enough meetings at the school to convince them he was serious. He also convinced the principal that he was serious; so much so, that the principal became forcefully and symbolically involved, too.

> RECOMMENDATION: CONVINCE STAFF THAT YOU ARE SERIOUS ABOUT THEIR IMPROVEMENT EFFORT. BECOME FORCEFULLY INVOLVED BOTH INFORMALLY AND FORMALLY: ATTEND MEETINGS, TALK TO THEM ABOUT THEIR EFFORTS, ENCOURAGE THEM TO INVOLVE THEMSELVES. REMEMBER THAT THE SYMBOLISM OF YOUR INVOLVEMENT MAY BE AS IMPORTANT AS ANY SUBSTANTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS.

Once symbolically involved, the principal sought to create conditions that would make staff involvement easier. Specifically, found ways to provide staff with unobligated time during their school day that would not end up being a disincentive; that is, time that would not keep them away from their students.

One solution was novel and served many goals. The principal approved a management team plan to allow students to earn "reward days," and he convinced the superintendent to approve it. Reward days were half-day vacations that came once every month. Students could earn a half-day off by exhibiting academic excellence, good citizenship, or perfect attendance. These days became in-service half-days, during which the management team met to plan improvement projects, and the rest of the staff met to plan how to carry out these projects. The students who did not qualify for reward days attended a study hall supervised by an assistant principal.

> RECOMMENDATION: FIND UNOBLIGATED TIME FOR YOUR STAFF. BUT MAKE SURE IT IS NOT A DISINCENTIVE--SIGNIFICANT TIME AWAY FROM THEIR STUDENTS. THIS OFTEN REQUIRES CREATIVITY AND NON-CONVENTIONAL THINKING. IT USUALLY REQUIRES A LOT OF IN-FRONT-OF AND BEHIND-THE-SCENES WORK.

Another resource adjustment was to ensure support services for the management team. In school, the principal made management team business a regular part of one secretary's responsibilities. This secretary provided typing, photocopying, telephoning, and other services. At the district level, the superintendent took pains to accommodate management team requests for additional materials, books, and the like that were related to Yorkshire school improvement projects. This included staff development time and, occasionally, substitutes for class coverage.

> RECOMMENDATION: PROVIDE THE MOST FINANCIAL, MATERIAL, AND SUPPORT SERVICES FOR THE IMPROVEMENT EFFORT POSSIBLE. SUPPORT SERVICES ARE PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT OF THESE.

Incentives

The concept of reward days for students provided teachers with unobligated time without the disincentive of being away from their students. Here though, another aspect of the reward days concept can be emphasized.

Adjusting his management style, the principal publicized reward days as the management team's idea and gave the management team and other staff all the credit for making it a reality. He did this with parents, the press, other principals in the district, and even with the superintendent, despite the fact that, if he had not put his own time and energy into it, it never would have happened. The principal seized on a good management team suggestion, worked with them and the superintendent to make it work, and gave them all the credit, both formally and informally. As noted, the reward days concept worked well as a way to provide more teacher time without short-changing students. It had another pay-off, too--it gave students a concrete reason to excel academically, behave themselves, maintain their attendance, etc. In giving the management team and faculty lots of recognition and credit for instituting reward days, the principal got even more mileage out of this one school improvement initiative--as an incentive for continued participation.

> RECOMMENDATION: WORK WITH YOUR STAFF TO HELP THEM SUCCEED AND CREATE AS MANY FORUMS AS POSSIBLE FOR RECOGNIZING SUCCESS IN THEIR IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS. THEN STEP BACK AND LET THEM TAKE THE CREDIT.

Linkages

The principal recognized that there was quite a bit of conflict among his teachers and not much informal linkage. Also, he recognized that it would be nearly impossible to create informal linkage, as he knew it has to develop on its own. The principal used formal structures to encourage interaction among staff, however. One was the management team itself. Although widely dispersed in different departments and sections of the school most of the time, the team members came together formally at the monthly meetings to discuss school problems and needs. As time went on, they began interacting informally, between their

regular meetings. And they eventually used both the informal and formal linkages to enhance their school improvement efforts.

Another formal structure, school improvement task groups, followed the same pattern, moving teachers from formal to informal interaction. The task groups were started by the management team as a way to involve other faculty in school improvement projects. Each management team member had the responsibility for researching solutions to a particular school problem and suggesting ways to address the problem. Part of this responsibility was to recruit other faculty members to help do the research, make the recommendations, and, if necessary, carry out the recommendations. By the third year, there were about eight school improvement task groups at Yorkshire Junior High. At first, the groups interacted--researching, recommending, and carrying out--in a formal way at monthly meetings. Later, as had happened with the management team, these groups began working informally as well.

> RECOMMENDATION: IF THERE ARE FEW INFORMAL LINKAGES, CREATE STRUCTURES THAT ENCOURAGE FORMAL LINKAGE. THE FORMAL INTERACTIONS MAY EVOLVE INTO INFORMAL ONES.

Priorities

School improvement, and particularly school improvement initiated and carried out by school site management teams, was the Yorkshire superintendent's top priority. This was said often and with great sincerity. In fact, the superintendent believed that convictions about the importance of locally-controlled school improvement and commitment to make it happen in Yorkshire helped him get tenure. His convictions and commitment to this approach to school improvement certainly helped gain the superintendent a great deal of school board and teacher association support and cooperation. In a sense, he equated his success as Yorkshire's superintendent with the

success of the school site management approach to improvement, and so was determined to make it succeed.

More importantly, the superintendent was able to convince the Yorkshire Junior High School administration and staff to make it the school's top priority. This approach simultaneously addressed two immediate challenges facing the district--first, developing some kind of school improvement effort that would halt and reverse declining achievement and second, increasing teacher involvement in school decision making. This fact was not lost on the principal; the superintendent made sure of that. The superintendent also made sure that it was not lost on Yorkshire's teachers or the leaders of their professional association. The clear message was: I'm throwing myself behind this effort. I think it will result in improvements in the school and students, and I'm willing to do anything I can to make it work. I expect you to do likewise.

This was very compelling. It energized a staff who were concerned about their school and students and who were dedicated professionals. They were looking for leadership and a concrete approach to school improvement, before jumping in with both feet.

> RECOMMENDATION: PUT THE IMPROVEMENT EFFORT VERY HIGH ON EVERYONE'S LIST OF PRIORITIES. THIS MAY INVOLVE SELLING IT TO SOMEONE--TEACHERS, SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, SUPERINTENDENT, PRINCIPAL. SO BE PREPARED TO SELL IT, AND SELL IT HARD.

Factions

There were high levels of tension at Yorkshire Junior High. That is, there were many factions at odds with each other. Much of this tension came from the frustration of seeing a high achieving, effective, well-regarded school begin to go the other way. But the frustration and tension were in

their early stages. Because school effectiveness had not deteriorated completely in the eyes of the staff, they had not reached the burned-out, counter-productive stage of tension. Moreover, the staff recognized that the challenges were not unsurmountable and, theoretically, they were willing to exert themselves to meet them. They just wanted the support, commitment, and guidance to carry out school improvement.

The superintendent saw it that way, too. He saw the management team approach as a way to reduce counter-productive tension, while initiating school improvements. In the beginning, the superintendent even emphasized the former goal rather than the latter. This was part of the sales pitch to Yorkshire's principal: the management team would reduce tension. It worked, too. As the management team met and planned with the principal and Yorkshire's other staff, the tension was channeled productively toward professional discussions and disagreements that contributed to the school improvement effort. Beyond that, as the various school improvement programs introduced began succeeding, the level of tension began to diminish.

> RECOMMENDATION: IF TENSION AMONG SCHOOL FACTIONS IS AT AN UNPRODUCTIVE LEVEL, TAKE STEPS TO REDUCE IT BEFORE INITIATING A SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PROJECT. WHEN IT REACHES A PRODUCTIVE LEVEL, IT CAN BE CHANNELLED TO CONTRIBUTE TO EFFECTIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT.

Turnover

Turnover in Yorkshire, as in many school districts, was not a severe problem. Most teachers were tenured, and there had been few recent reductions in staffing. Reassignments occurred with some regularity, however. Teachers from one school would be sent to other schools as enrollments rose and fell. Although not job threatening, this practice was a sore point with teachers who resented having no control over where they might be from year to year.

This resentment ran particularly high at Yorkshire Junior High, because historically, junior high school teachers were reassigned most frequently. This resentment may have also played a part in creating tension at Yorkshire. In any event, the principal was very aware of the reassignment situation, the resentment it caused, and the importance to morale of giving staff a sense of permanence. With this in mind, the principal asked the superintendent to try to see to it that the members of the Yorkshire management team would be placed in a low spot on the reassignment list. The superintendent agreed and even went a step further, assuring the principal that before reassigning any Yorkshire Junior High teacher, they would confer to see how vital that teacher was to the management team and to any other school improvement effort at Yorkshire.

Armed with this assurance, the principal had little trouble recruiting participants. The interest ran high among all teachers, and the principal was able to pick a management team comprised of the most motivated, capable staff. Their first charge, by the way, was to develop a team renewal procedure to enable all Yorkshire teachers, who wanted to sit on the management team, to do so sooner or later.

As for administrative turnover, there was virtually no risk of either the building principal or the superintendent leaving the district in the near future. The latter had just received a vote of confidence from the Board of Education and his contract had been renewed for five years. Moreover, he had promised the Board and the community to remain Yorkshire's superintendent until the improvement goals were met. The principal also was secure in his job and was satisfied to stay there until retirement. The principal talked about his status as a respected, settled member of the Yorkshire community,

reflecting that he would be hard pressed to accept even an extremely generous offer to move to another position. The superintendent was well aware of the principal's attitude, and factored it into his planning when selecting Yorkshire Junior High as the first site of this management team approach to school improvement.

> RECOMMENDATION: MINIMIZE TURNOVER OR THREAT OF TURNOVER WHEREVER POSSIBLE. IF IT CANNOT BE MINIMIZED, PLAN WITH TURNOVER IN MIND; DO NOT INVOLVE STAFF WHO ARE LIKELY TO MOVE.

Current Practices

One of Yorkshire's most striking characteristics prior to the introduction of this site management team effort was the absence of cooperative planning. It was rarely done within departments and almost never occurred across departments. So the establishment of a site management team made up of teachers working together to identify and solve problems required, to say the least, a great change in the customary behavior of Yorkshire's staff. It also required skills that most of them had not used in a long time--if at all. Yet, this seemingly insurmountable obstacle became only a minor difficulty because the principal used a great deal of subtlety with the staff.

Rather than introduce the management team concept dramatically to the staff as a great new effort, the principal took a low-key, informal approach. He simply began asking for opinions and input about what was needed to improve the school. The principal told them he wanted to use these opinions for Yorkshire's long range school improvement plan. Resisting surveys and special meetings, instead the principal spoke casually with staff in the faculty room, the hallways, or the parking lot. This went on for about a month. Then the principal asked selected staff members if they would like to get together with him as a group. Those who agreed were invited for lunch or breakfast from

time to time. This went on for another couple of months, then at one of these meetings, the group, not the principal, suggested regularizing the sessions and focusing the discussion by creating meeting schedules and agendas. At this point the principal's role became symbolic; the site management team had been formed.

> RECOMMENDATION: SOFT-PEDDLE ANY DRAMATIC CHANGES AN IMPROVEMENT EFFORT REQUIRES. EASE STAFF INTO NEW BEHAVIORS OR SKILLS. IF POSSIBLE, SET THE STAGE SO THAT THE CHANGES COME FROM THEM WHEN THEY ARE READY.

As noted earlier, there was not much in the way of formal mechanisms for encouraging Yorkshire's staff. Neither were there any informal mechanisms. However, the attention the members of the nascent management team got from the principal served this function when the effort was getting off the ground. The novelty of having the principal ask for and listen to their opinions encouraged them to put more of their time and energy into offering these opinions. The more the principal listened, the more encouraged they were to offer suggested solutions as well as opinions. When the principal adopted some of their suggestions, they were even more encouraged. In time, their suggestions were producing results with students, and this encouraged them to make long-term commitments to the effort and to recruit others to join.

> RECOMMENDATION: SUCCESS MAY VERY WELL BE THE BEST ENCOURAGEMENT. BUILD SUCCESS AT SOME LEVEL INTO EVERY PHASE OF THE IMPROVEMENT EFFORT. SUCCESS WILL COME WHEN THE EFFORT AND THE STAFF CARRYING IT OUT ARE SUPPORTED.

Prior Projects

One of the first things the superintendent mentioned when he was trying to convince Yorkshire's principal to establish a school site management team was how such a team could contribute to the district's long range planning

project. Every five years, the state department of education called on each district to formulate five-year plans. The formulation process was always a major undertaking involving district administrators at all levels. In addition, the process itself was quite specific with a long list of required advisory panels, procedures, and public meetings. The Yorkshire management team, reasoned the superintendent, could help formulate the school's plan thereby freeing the principal, to some degree, from a time-consuming task. In doing this, Yorkshire also would be meeting a state requirement that called for teacher input. The principal saw the value of using the management team in this way and, in fact, used similar logic to gain his staff's involvement.

As a result, the management team became linked to a project already underway--the long range planning effort--both in the Yorkshire staff's mind and in reality. The two efforts reinforced and contributed to each other and never seemed to be in conflict. More importantly, staff did not consider themselves to be doing double duty: carrying out two separate efforts.

This strategy set a pattern at Yorkshire Junior High. Subsequent projects always were linked to the site management team effort. None was allowed to compete with the management team. In fact, staff saw most of these projects as short-term, whereas they came to see the management team as on-going.

RECOMMENDATION: TO MAXIMIZE LONGEVITY, COMMITMENT, AND MOTIVATION, LINK NEW IMPROVEMENT PROJECTS TO CURRENT ONES. MAKE THEM SEEM LIKE ONE CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT EFFORT.

CONCLUSIONS

The experiences of the staffs of the Jackson High, Pine Lane Elementary, and Yorkshire Junior High schools illustrate how school context plays an extremely vital role in school improvement. As with Jackson, context can undermine an improvement effort and render it useless. Or with Pine Lane, context can help an improvement effort take hold and flourish. But most importantly, as with Yorkshire, context can be modified to become supportive, if it is analyzed and addressed.

We believe that context can be analyzed and for us the School Context Analysis Form provides a valuable process for that analysis. Moreover, we find the information we get when we use this analysis form serves as an invaluable point of departure for dealing with and modifying context thereby encouraging lasting school improvement.

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